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Wild Women:

The Positive Transformation of Women and Girls through Female-Only Adventure Education

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Abstract

Wild Women:

The Positive Transformation of Women and Girls Through Female-Only Adventure Education

This paper explores the positive effects of female-only outdoor education on the empowerment and self-esteem of women and girls. The author researches the different methods outdoor education programs and organizations use to facilitate an environment in which this empowerment can occur through an extensive literature review and personal interviews of participants, instructors, and directors. These methods include, but are not limited to, female-only settings, the wilderness solo, overcoming fears, and the acquirement of technical outdoor knowledge. The author also argues the empowerment of women and girls depends on the geographical context of the wilderness; these programs would not be as effective if they had an urban foundation. Women and girls acquire useful tools, such as survival knowledge, conflict resolution, defining self-desire, and so on as a result of their experiences in the wild. These tools can transcend into their everyday lives, creating a positive long-term impact in which they can overcome life's greatest obstacles as women in a patriarchal society.

Keywords: transformation, empowerment, outdoors, geography, women, and girls

Introduction

When I was 11 years old, my mother brought home a flier advertising a program called Goddess. This program brought girls into the wild for backpacking, rock climbing, and ropes courses, aiming to empower them through their experiences in the wilderness and enrich their lives in the urban world. Solely interested in fueling my desire for outdoor experiences, I never expected the deep and life-changing impact Goddess would have on me. After seven years of annual Goddess trips, I gained self-esteem, confidence, and independence because Goddess taught me I was not simply a woman living in a man's world; I was a woman who deserved to live in a man *and* woman's world.

Throughout my years of participating in Goddess, I observed I was not the only one to develop self-esteem, relational and technical skills, and an overall sense of empowerment. I have seen numerous girls go through the program, and most of them have positively changed in some way by the end of the course. Today, I am a field instructor for The Women's Wilderness Institute (TWWI) in Boulder, Colorado, and I continue to see incredible transformations in girls and women after spending time in the wild. As a result of my experiences as a participant and instructor of girls and women's outdoor programs, I became more interested in exploring the reasons why experiential education seems to yield such positive results for female participants, especially when boys and men are not present. Specifically, I sought to address the following research questions: Do women and girls walk away from outdoor education programs with newfound empowerment and independence? If so, why and how does this occur? Does the feeling of empowerment last? This research is based in a geographical context because I studied the relationship between people and nature. These research questions aimed to discover how the geography of the wilderness plays a role in improving girls and women's emotional and physical

development as opposed to the geography of the urban setting. For this paper, I use the word “urban” as a general term for any setting that is not the secluded wild. Therefore, “urban” can refer to cities, suburbs, and rural towns for the sake of this research. My work also focused on women 18 years or older in the United States who have participated in Goddess and/or other similar programs, such as TWWI.

Empowerment can mean very different things for very different people. According to Judi Chamberlain and Aart Schene, empowerment is the combination of the ability to make decisions, accessibility to resources that make those decisions possible, and the act of being assertive and confident in making those choices (1997). For my research, I mainly focused on empowerment as a power from within and power with (collective action). I see this power as the ability to overcome one’s obstacles. In the case of women and girls, the general obstacle is most often sexism. However, it is important to note the effects of sexism can be very different for individuals. Therefore, individuals’ sense of empowerment may be very dissimilar as well. In this case, I focus on empowerment as a power from within, but I am aware that not everyone may agree. I mainly look for some form of empowerment within participants as long as it resulted from their experiences participating in women and/or girls’ outdoor programs. With this being said, I draw most of my conclusions about empowerment from my personal interviews instead of previous literature due to the individualization of this concept. In addition, I want to highlight empowerment as a form of *personal* power, which can be conveyed more effectively based on the results of my one-on-one interviews.

In addition to recognizing empowerment as a complicated concept to research and analyze, I am aware of my positionality in this project. Due to my stance as a former participant and current instructor of female-only outdoor programs, I realize I may have bias about this

topic. However, even though bias is a shortcoming, I believe my positionality is also beneficial to this research because I have connections in the outdoor industry. Therefore, finding interview subjects was relatively non-problematic. In addition, I had the base to delve deeper into the research. I came into this research with enough experience to understand the technicalities and structure of the outdoor industry. Therefore, I was free to focus on asking interviewees the harder questions. For example, instead of spending time learning about what the wilderness solo is, I was able to focus on how the wilderness solo empowers girls and women, making more effective use of my time with the interviewees.

Methods

I qualitatively researched this topic through personal and phone interviews of participants and instructors (12 instructors/directors and five participants). I personally knew all subjects previous to the research, and I obtained written consent from each before beginning the interview process. I have given pseudonyms for each subject in order to keep her identity safe. Some interviewees wished to be addressed by their trail names as well. In this paper, I focus on five interviews, three of which are from instructors/directors and two of which are from participants, and analyze them separately. I use these examples to highlight the most important parts of my research after giving more general conclusions of my findings because these specific women had particular insights in answering my research questions. After analyzing the interview data, I have found that female-only outdoor education is an effective method for empowering girls and women and creating a lasting impact in their lives. I interviewed instructors who have led both female-only and coeducational courses, and my findings indicate that even though both types of programs are in the geographical setting of the wild, coeducational curriculums are not as

effective for empowering girls and women due to the presence of boys and men. I explain these findings more clearly in later chapters.

My Story

I remember the first time my father assaulted me. He would work nights and sleep during the day. My brother and I were playing downstairs, and our noise woke him up. He grabbed the broom; I cowered in the corner. I did not move until long after my dad had left and my mom had come home. The tears had left salty scars on my face, and the bruises on my back had begun to form.

“I’m so sorry, sweetie.” I could hear the regret in my father’s voice over the phone receiver. I wanted to scream. I wanted to hate him. But I didn’t.

“It’s okay, daddy.” He promised he would never hit me again. I believed him, and I continued to believe him 13 years and countless assaults later.

I thought I could get used to his beatings, hateful words, and lies. I thought I could normalize the pain, but I still found myself crying every time afterwards. I spent more time outside the house than in it because I was afraid. I could never predict his rage, and I feared anything I said or did could set him off.

I began to hate myself. What was I doing wrong? Did my father love me at all? Did I love him? One thing was for sure: I did not love myself.

I remember when my mom brought home a flier advertising a free outdoor program for girls called Goddess. She thought it would simply spark my attention since I had been expressing interest in outdoor activities. Neither of us could predict the deep and life-changing impacts Goddess had on me.

I grieved the final day of my last Goddess trip. For almost seven years, I had been a part of something bigger than my circumstances and myself: the wild. I had climbed to the top of mountains. I had carried everything I needed on my back. I had scaled rock walls and jumped off cliffs. I had lived.

Goddess saved my life. I shiver at the thought of what could have become of me if it was not for Goddess. I doubt I would have been able to continue; I would have killed myself if my father was not going to beat me to it, but I am here now. Goddess taught me that my father's actions towards me have never dictated who I am, and no matter how hard he tried, he could not control me. The wilderness, like my home, is a scary place. However, Goddess taught me that how I react to fear can have extremely positive outcomes. I did not run away from the wild, and I fell in love with the outdoors and myself as a result. In doing so, I decided not to run away from my father, and I managed to find the strength to sever him from my life. I stopped cowering in the corner. I used my voice. The beatings did not stop, but the tears afterwards certainly did. I began to hug myself instead.

If I had to select a specific turning point for my life on one of my Goddess trips, it would be my first solo experience. On my first trip, my instructors brought each of us to a specific secluded spot away from the others. We were instructed to spend a few hours at that spot by ourselves. We could not communicate with anyone else, and we only had our journals, a pen, and a bottle of water. I was scared. I had never been alone in the woods even if it was just for a few hours, but I decided I would give it a try. In those few hours, everything changed.

I became truly present.

Up until then, I had never been fully conscious of my existence. In fact, I would spend most of my time trying to be as nonexistent as possible in the hope that my father would not

notice me. I became an expert at being silent, keeping my opinions to myself at all times, but during my solo experience, I noticed myself. I recognized the way the wind would blow my hair in front of my face; I rejoiced in the crunch of the leaves beneath my feet; I started to talk not *to* myself but *with* myself. I had begun to form a relationship with the most important person in my life: me.

My first solo experience was not the first time I had been alone. In fact, I spent most of my childhood alone in my room. It was, however, the first time I had been alone without feeling lonely. The trees, creek, rocks, animals, etc. enveloped me in a comfort that I had never known – a love that only my mother's could compare. Being alone in the outdoors had fostered a sense of knowing in myself. I can never be alone as long as I know *I* am here. I am present.

I moved 2,000 miles away in order to permanently escape my father's beatings, but he continues to abuse me through financial and emotional means. My mother and I are currently doing everything we can to end this terror once and for all, but in the meantime, I take comfort in the fact that I know it will end because I am strong enough to make it so. I carry the emotional scars of my father's abuse with me everywhere I go, but by embracing them and acknowledging my strength, I take ownership of my body. They are *my* scars, not his.

I have chosen to share my story of abuse because I want my readers to understand why I have conducted this research. It is one thing for me to personally experience the positive effects of female-only outdoor education, but I want to know if other girls and women would agree with the power of programs like Goddess. Not every participant and/or instructor necessarily needs to have a past filled with trauma, as I am looking for positive results based on their experiences in the wild regardless of their childhood experiences.

Literature Review

In this chapter, I draw primarily from experiential education and psychology journals, such as the *Journal of Adventure Education & Outdoor Learning* and *Women & Therapy*, to show that female-only outdoor education helps girls and women in various physical and emotional ways. Physically, girls and women develop a positive body image and gain new technical outdoor skills, such as navigation and camp setup. Emotionally, girls and women develop a strong self-esteem, learn how to bond with fellow women and girls, and embrace fears. My literature review discusses girls and women separately because while both age groups have benefited from their outdoor experiences, their positions in different life stages may make them respond to these experiences dissimilarly. For example, a young girl may be more focused on her body image while an older woman may be more focused on gaining independence; priorities for these two age groups are different. Therefore, it is important to separate women and girls in the literature review in order to accurately analyze their positive transformations as a result of participating in female-only adventure programs.

Girls and Adolescents

Girls and women respond to outdoor education differently because of their differences in age and life experiences. In this section, I focus on the impact of outdoor education on girls and adolescents' physical and emotional development.

The body and physical capabilities

Girls and adolescents' lives are much different now than they were just a decade ago when I was their age. We live in a media-driven world where nothing is efficient until everything is coded, digitized, and distributed in mass quantities. Conversations have become electronic,

and everything is faster, yet there seems to be less time in the day. Through this media and electronic obsession, the Internet has become accessible anywhere on laptops, smartphones, and tablets. About 90 percent of teenage and preteen girls in the United States have access to the Internet in some form (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014, p. 616). Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media networks have placed society in a visually judgmental state where people no longer need to meet face to face in order to learn each other's physical attributes; a profile picture is now the preferred context.

Our visual world can pressure girls to indulge in unhealthy psychological and physical habits (eating disorders and low self-esteem, for example) (Veldhuis, Konijn, & Seidell, 2014). More eyes are on them now that their "friends" on Facebook can access their images with the click of a button. In addition, cyber bullying is likely to occur and worsen since bullies have the protection of a computer screen to hide behind (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014, p. 617). These influences can dramatically drive a girl's self-esteem to the ground. Low self-esteem can adversely affect other important parts of their lives, such as relationships, school, and family matters.

Building a strong self-esteem is crucial during a girl's developing years because it can provide her with the foundation to achieve future goals. Girls who have lower levels of self-esteem and self-confidence are more likely to do poorly in school and not go to college (Mann, 2013). In addition, many adult women who have low body and self-esteem claim to have developed this during their childhood and adolescence. On the other hand, many women with strong senses of self claim to have developed a healthy self-esteem at an early age (Oswald, Franzoi, & Frost, 2012), which is why it is important to raise our girls to learn how to love and care for themselves. Outdoor education can provide girls with the tools necessary to develop this

self-love and overcome the obstacles of sexism that may put them at greater risk for low self-esteem. In this next section, I explore the effects of adventure education on girls' appreciation for their bodies, body image, and development of technical skills as discussed in sociological literature.

Body image and body satisfaction. Girls are internalizing the 'thin ideal' at a much younger age than ever before (Veldhuis, Konijn, & Seidell, 2014, p. 156). Studies have shown that dieting can occur as early as age five (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014, p. 608). By the time girls have reached their preteen years, they begin to associate their identities with the numbers they see on a scale. In addition, the thin ideal has changed over the last half-century. A size six was once "too skinny;" now size six pants are enormous in comparison to the double zero pants so many girls are starving themselves to fit into.

The dissatisfaction of girls regarding their appearance has become a normal part of society. Hayley Dohnt and Marika Tiggemann describe the common appearance of girls' low body image as "normative discontent" (2006, p. 929). With one in five ninth grade girls bingeing and purging (Dowling, 2006), it is evident body dissatisfaction is an epidemic among adolescent girls. This dissatisfaction can be connected to the media because countless images of airbrushed models bombard girls when they log onto a computer, browse the Internet on their smartphone, drive through the city, etc. Even though a countless number of these images have been edited to fulfill unrealistic standards, many girls still absorb this information and thus place themselves in a dangerous position in order to attempt to achieve the thin ideal. This danger can include eating disorders, such as anorexia and bulimia, and psychological disorders, such as depression (Dowling, 2006). These disorders can negatively impact girls' lives; girls lack motivation to do

well in school, struggle with their family relationships and friendships, and may face death as a result of suicidal thoughts and/or lack of nutrition (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006, p. 932).

Recreating in the outdoors can counteract negative self-body image. Girls can begin to see their bodies for their capabilities, making their own physical appearances much more positive in their eyes. Achieving rock climbing, mountaineering, backpacking, and other outdoor activities shows girls the strength of their bodies in capacities they never imagined. “These levels of achievement provide positive feelings of personal competence, which, rather than representing a dichotomous male/mind centered repression of the body, signify a mind/body harmony which enables one to achieve new levels of body satisfaction” (Kiewa 1996, p. 10) Jackie Kiewa emphasizes the shift in body image from one that is male-dominated to one that is self-dominated. Girls are growing up with the beauty ideal all around them, and they are learning this beauty ideal must satisfy men; they must be pretty enough to marry a man in order to be happy. However, when girls are exposed to activities that have a concrete accomplishment (the view from the top of a mountain or a rock wall, for example), then their bodies become entities of purpose rather than solely spaces for men to occupy literally or conceptually. Girls become consciously aware they are the owners of their bodies and not anyone else.

Girls can claim their bodies for themselves better in a wilderness setting than an outdoor setting because there is an element of emotional reflection rather than physical, according to Dene S. Berman and Jennifer Davis-Berman (2005). This element of emotional reflection refers to the lack of physical reflections that can be found in the urban setting that cannot be found in the wilderness setting (mirrors, windows, ‘selfies,’ etc.). We have become adaptive to seeing ourselves in mirrors and, in some cases, obsessive; people, especially women, have an innate need to turn their heads at any opportunity to see their reflections (walking by a car or store

window, for example) (Berman & Davis-Berman, 2005). This can be detrimental to girls' self-esteem because these habits can influence girls to care more about their body's appearance rather than its capabilities. In addition, when girls look at themselves in the mirror, they often focus on the negative traits of their appearance rather than the positive ones. The wilderness, however, forces girls to separate themselves from mirrors. "Looking in a mirror is like looking from the outside in, whereas when you're in the woods, you're looking from the inside out" (TWWI participant, age 16, 2014) ("Girls' Wilderness Adventures and Women's Courses | Women's Wilderness"). Girls experience emotional self-reflection because they begin to focus on the importance of their personalities and qualities that make it possible for them to survive in the wilderness. Suddenly, make-up and appearance no longer matters, liberating girls to look within themselves and find the positive characteristics of their bodies from the inside out.

Technical skills development. "Later, I requested her assistance with the mattress. He was there seconds later and, gentleman that he is, took over. Danni watched" (Kiewa, 1996, p. 7). Kiewa expresses an important phenomenon that often escapes unnoticed by most people: the "helplessness" of women. To be a "gentleman," men must hold the door for women, carry their heavy bags, mow their lawns, etc. The list could go on forever. Girls grow up watching and learning this phenomenon. By believing men should do all the heavy work, women are left dependent on men, perpetuating sexism. In addition, technical work, especially in the outdoors, is often left to the men. Girls often see their dads, brothers, uncles, etc. building the fire and setting up the tent while their moms are admiring the beauty of nature. This leaves girls in a dangerous position where their survival skills, self-competence, and independence are limited.

Outdoor education requires a great deal of heavy lifting and technical knowledge. Women and girls-only programs are extremely beneficial for their empowerment because they

are forced to learn the skills necessary for surviving in the wilderness. Women and girls tend to internalize their “helplessness,” but being in an outdoor setting without men and boys can externalize this phenomenon. Typically, girls face the dilemma of being “too masculine” if they exhibit certain traits, such as assertiveness, decision-making, and technical skills (Wittmer, 2001, p. 174). During a time of growth and development, this dilemma can be detrimental to a girl’s maturation into a confident young woman. However, the wilderness does not know gender roles. Girls do not have the choice to revert to these traditional gender roles because survival depends on the establishment of shelter, the lifting of packs, and the building of fire no matter who gets these jobs done. Without men and boys present, girls succeed in these “masculine” tasks in a male-dominated field. As a result, girls feel a sense of accomplishment and realize they can accomplish other tasks in various male-dominated fields (Davidson, 2001, p. 14), even in the urban world post-course. Many of my fellow participants in Goddess, for example, have become the first women in their families to graduate college, study science and mathematics, and fulfill various leadership roles. These improvements can have extremely positive impacts in the everyday lives of these girls. Not only are they more competent physically as a result of their outdoor experiences, but also this competence inspires them to pursue goals they never would have considered before their courses.

Emotional stability and self-esteem

Sisterhood. “A group of girls is one of the most amazing things you can put together” (TWWI participant, age 12). One of the most significant benefits of adventure education for women and girls is the presence of females only and not men. When men are present, traditional gender roles remain prominent (Nolan & Priest, 1993, p. 15). These gender roles are damaging

women and girls' self-concepts, so female-only outdoor programs provide an outlet for them to explore themselves solely *for* themselves.

Patriarchy and misogyny maintain power in many different ways. One of the most important ways this power remains strong is through the negative rivalries between women and girls (Christakis, 2012). Women and girls internalize sexism, and since sexism calls for the subordinate position of females under males, women and girls will often have competitions in order to "win" the best man. Girls are facing this internalized sexism head on due to our society's media craze. Before the Internet, women and girls would simply gossip about each other behind their backs. Now, however, cyber bullying has taken this competition to another level; girls are tearing each other down through rampant media gossip, exploitive photos, etc. (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014, p. 609). When girls cannot come together as a community, then the foundation of feminism is cracked. It is not possible to overcome patriarchy if women cannot see the value in each other as agents of their own lives.

Girls-only outdoor programs offer girls the opportunity to overcome internalized sexism. Girls work together in order to accomplish tasks (i.e. cooking, cleaning, setting up and breaking down camp, etc.). During these tasks, girls have the opportunity to get to know each other, develop friendships, and expand their perspectives of what it means to be a girl. "Cultural feminists believe that it is women's qualities and experiences, not men's that should be the measure of significance in society. The women-centered phase examines the experiences of women in an attempt to understand the importance and meaning of women's lives, not as a comparison to men" (Henderson, 1996, p. 110). Outdoor programs for women and girls only embrace this "women-centered" phase as an important step towards liberating women and girls from the traditional gender roles of wife, daughter, sister, etc., which are all roles in *relation* to

men. Without defining themselves in relation to boys and in comparison to other girls, girls can develop strong self-esteem, piecing together the foundation of feminism as more girls and women find strength in themselves and respect for each other.

Supporting one another and developing strong bonds can empower women. This form of empowerment is known as “power with” (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002, p. 39). As opposed to “power within” (self-worth) and “power over” (taking power from someone else), “power with” refers to the collective action of a group of people with similar interests and oppressions, according to VeneKlasen and Miller (2002). Therefore, when girls and women develop sisterhood as a result of their shared experiences in the wilderness, they begin to participate in empowerment as “power with.” When women and girls can work together and assert their power together, they are more likely to overcome sexist and patriarchal obstacles because a multitude of voices are more likely to create change than one. In addition, this sisterhood community can provide a supportive environment in which women and girls learn from one another and access the empowerment they need to challenge patriarchy. Furthermore, this sense of sisterhood can transcend to the urban environment because women and girls learn how to work together in the outdoors, making them more likely to appreciate other women and girls post-course. When women and girls learn how to have gratitude for one another, they can focus on challenging larger structural oppressions rather than each other.

Overcoming fears. The only way to get off a rock wall is down. The only way to get to camp at the other side of a mountain is to climb over. The only way to get home from a backpacking trip is to walk. The wilderness can be a scary place. For young girls especially, spending time in the outdoors can be a relatively new experience, making the wilderness even scarier. In addition, since outdoor recreation is customarily a male-dominated field, girls can

have anxiety about their capabilities based on their gender. These factors all contribute to the effectiveness of outdoor education on girls' empowerment because overcoming one's fears can be a powerful experience that inspires one to face other fears.

In the urban setting, girls have the choice to walk away from their fears. In fact, traditional gender roles often encourage them to do so, while boys are encouraged to face their fears (Wittmer, 2001, p. 173). In the geographical setting of the wild, girls are not given the option to walk away. In fact, facing fears is often necessary in order to prevent an emergency (helping each other on dangerous terrain, for example). Because girls are not given the option to run away from their fears, they learn that they are capable of overcoming scary obstacles. In this way, their self-esteem increases, and they can use this tool to overcome fears in other aspects of their lives. These other fears can be as miniscule as facing a big test at school or as significant as facing an abuser. No matter the intensity of the fear, girls can face them with the tools they acquired as a result of their experiences in the wild.

Adult Women

Women and girls gain many similar tools through outdoor education for developing their empowerment and self-esteem, but women often apply them differently since they are in such different stages of their lives. Girls are in the process of discovering who they are and what they want. Women, however, have already gone through this process, even though not every adult woman may necessarily realize all of her wants and desires. In this section, I will explain how the experiences of outdoor education are incorporated into women's everyday lives.

The body and physical capabilities

Body image. Although many women may not be as involved in social media as adolescent girls, they are still bombarded with images of the "beauty ideal" every day through

advertisements. In addition, adolescent girls face the body challenges of puberty while adult women face the body challenges of pregnancy and birth (if they choose the path of motherhood) and aging. For adult women, the “beauty ideal” includes more than thinness, fashion, and make-up; the ideal also incorporates the phenomenon of age, and women face a significant double standard in comparison to men when it comes to growing older. Men are seen as wise and elegant when their hair begins to turn gray; on the other hand, women are seen as ugly and less competent (Zink & Burrows, 2008, p. 258). This double standard can negatively affect women’s self-esteem and their overall confidence.

Outdoor education can be physically draining. However, when adult women accomplish these difficult tasks, they soon begin to realize that their age is just a number. As a result, their confidence in themselves skyrockets (“Girls’ Wilderness Adventures and Women’s Courses | Women’s Wilderness,” n.d.). Participants learn the value of their bodies for their capabilities rather than their age or appearance. For adults, this can be extremely empowering because they have lived their whole lives with patriarchy telling them they should leave the “dirty work” to men. When women discover they can do this “dirty work” themselves, a whole new realm of possibilities appears in front of them.

Technical skills development and self-efficacy. The development of women’s technical skills in the outdoors is very similar to girls. Women gain many new abilities, such as reading a map, navigating a canoe, tying knots, etc. These masteries can further boost their self-esteem and confidence. However, women gain a much more profound sense of leadership and self-efficacy than girls as a result of their outdoor experiences (Henderson, 1996, p. 9). Self-efficacy is one’s ability to rely on oneself, especially in situations of emergency where split-second decisions and judgments must be made (Propst & Koesler, 1998, p. 321). Femininity calls for being a follower

and taking care of others; women are seen as nurturers while men are seen as breadwinners.

Therefore, when women gain a sense of self-efficacy as a result of their newfound skills, they begin to step out of the traditional gender roles they have been trapped in all their lives. “Self-efficacy has a positive impact on individual success, confidence, and future development” (Propst & Koesler, 1998, p. 321). Women’s self-efficacy as a result of their outdoor experiences thus transcends into other aspects of their lives, creating a positive internal reliance on oneself rather than an external reliance on others, most often men. This shift from dependence to independence can play a crucial role in women’s development as subjects of their own lives rather than the objects of others.

Emotional stability and self-esteem

Sisterhood and the wilderness solo. The concept of sisterhood in women-only outdoor programs is empowering similarly to girls-only programs. However, for adults, there seems to be more of an emphasis on the importance of valuing other women rather than the importance of accomplishing goals without the help of men (Nolan & Priest, 1993, p. 15). As women share their life stories around the campfire and support each other when things become difficult, there is a sense of compassion between participants. This empathy then transcends into the everyday lives of these women as they begin to have more appreciation for each other. This bonding can be extremely beneficial for the feminist movement because it counteracts the power of patriarchy to influence women’s negative rivalries against other women. When women can come together to see the value in each other, then they can see the value in themselves as well. This sense of self-worth is powerful because it can change women’s lives to be more fulfilling and meaningful.

Almost all outdoor programs include some sort of wilderness solo (Angell, 1994, p. 85). A wilderness solo is when someone spends time alone in the outdoors, and it can take the form

of a “VisionQuest, the reflective solo, the survival skills solo, and a simple self-imposed period of time alone in the wilderness” (Angell, 1994, p. 85). While the group dynamic of outdoor programs is very beneficial in regards to developing communication skills and teamwork, the wilderness solo is advantageous because it is scary and promotes women to spend time with themselves without the hustle and bustle of urban life. This time of self-reflection can be extremely therapeutic and healing (Angell, 1994, p. 89). In addition, the geographical setting of the outdoors improves the effectiveness of the wilderness solo because it provides a state of true solitude; in the urban setting, another person could be right next door even if one cannot hear or see them. Psychologically, this makes the urban setting less effective because in the wild there is essentially no one around. This extreme state of solitude can be scary, but this fear can facilitate deeper self-reflection (Young & Ewert, 1992). Why am I afraid to be alone? Most often by the end of the solo, women feel a sense of calm towards this question. Journaling, for example, is a great way to achieve this calm, and writing can be very healing and beneficial for self-esteem development. When women can feel at peace with themselves *by themselves*, then they can embrace the obstacles in their lives with the comfort of knowing they can always rely on their own capabilities and strengths.

Findings

After completing all my interviews, I have found that all-female outdoor programs are effective for transforming girls and women's confidence, empowerment, and self-esteem. There are various reasons for this, including the absence of men, the geography of the wild, and the unique activities involved in the outdoors, such as rock climbing, hiking, backpacking, etc. I have selected three interviews from instructors and two from participants (out of 12 instructors and five participants), and I analyze them in individual sections in order to further critically engage with my analysis and provide my research with human voices. Furthermore, I explain the most prevalent themes I found across my interviews and divide them between instructors and participants. I separate instructors and participants because while there are many similar responses to their experiences in the wild, there are also several different important themes that arise as a result of being either a teacher or a learner. All participants and instructors agreed that outdoor education for girls and women is extremely beneficial to their development as strong, independent people. However, participants and instructors did not unanimously agree upon every theme as a crucial part of this development process, which is why it is important that I separate these voices to provide the readers with a clear understanding of what it means to be in the wild as a participant or as an instructor.

Once again, empowerment is a huge part of girls and women's outdoor education. According to Susan Mboya, empowerment is taking full control over one's own life (2014). While this is a very general definition, I researched what empowerment meant for each of my interview subjects, and how empowerment is interwoven in the wilderness education context. In this section, I discuss the different facets of empowerment that arise as a result of experiencing the wilderness according to the individual responses of my interviewees.

Instructor Themes

I interviewed 12 instructors of female-only outdoor programs. In this section, I discuss the most common and important themes that appeared in all of my interviews. These themes provide evidence for the positive transformation of girls and women in the outdoors and explain why a wilderness curriculum is so beneficial for the participants. While these concepts often overlap, I separate them in this section in order to critically and clearly analyze each, helping the readers understand the importance of these themes for the female-only outdoor education curriculum. The themes include challenging gender norms, embracing fear, empowerment, the geography of the wilderness, and creating lasting transformations.

Challenging gender norms

The first and most common theme was the fact that a female-only environment is more effective for empowering women and girls because there are no men around to overpower them and domineer, especially since the outdoor industry is such a male-heavy field. I interviewed several coeducational as well as single gender instructors, and all of them have noticed a difference in the way girls perceive and portray themselves in these different group settings. Carrie, for example, is an instructor at The Women's Wilderness Institute (TWI) as well as The Cottonwood Institute, which runs coeducational programs. She notes that all kids tend to "put up barriers" in the beginning of the course because the whole experience is unfamiliar, but boys will definitely shed these barriers more easily and quickly than girls. On the other hand, when girls are surrounded by other girls and women only, Carrie says the barriers come down alarmingly fast, which she emphasizes is where the "true learning" takes place. If the aim of outdoor education is to help children and adults learn in new ways that challenges them, then female-only outdoor programs are necessary to allow women and girls to feel comfortable

enough to break down their barriers and focus more on learning than how others may perceive their actions as gendered.

As a result of being surrounded by all girls and women, girls learn how to challenge the gender norms they have become so accustomed to in the urban world. Not only do girls and women have the opportunity to take on conventionally male roles, but also a supportive community of people who are experiencing the same gender challenges surrounds them. Therefore, a sense of camaraderie is developed within the group, further encouraging girls and women to take on other male roles, such as careers in science, math, and engineering. Part of this supportive community is the presence of strong female leaders. When young girls and women have experienced and knowledgeable female instructors, then they see concrete examples of women who have turned their backs to gender norms and embraced their true selves and voices. Participants see strong, capable women who do not need men to build a fire or climb a mountain. The presence of these role models can significantly impact a girl or woman to look at herself and ask, “Can I be just as capable and independent?” As a result of their experiences in the wild, the answer is most often “yes.”

Authentic challenge and embracing fear

Challenge is the next big theme that the instructors emphasized. The geographical setting of the wilderness is more effective for helping girls and women gain confidence because the challenges are authentic and utterly scary. However, with trained and experienced instructors, girls learn how to overcome these challenges, which inspires them to overcome future obstacles. According to Leia, who is currently working on her Ph.D. at Prescott College in Arizona, being *aware* of challenges is also important because once a girl or a woman can recognize an obstacle, then she can work through it step by step. This is more effective than facing challenges blindly

because overcoming them in an imperceptive context is not always successful. When girls and women participate in outdoor programs, they are faced with obvious, tangible challenges, such as weather complications, safety concerns, and more. They learn to recognize these problems and how to work through them. However, on a deeper level, girls and women learn about the challenges they face just by being girls and women. This can happen by sharing and listening about past trauma, for example. Furthermore, when participants are surrounded by girls and women like themselves, they can feel comfortable talking about bigger issues like sexism and patriarchy. This is where the recognition of less tangible challenges takes place, giving girls and women the tools to recognize these obstacles in the urban world. Once they recognize them, they can fight them.

Empowerment

The third most prevalent theme in the instructor interviews was the concept of empowerment. “Empowerment” is a heavy word loaded with many meanings and contexts. All the instructors agreed that empowerment can occur in many different ways for different people. Carrie says there are two important ingredients for general empowerment: confidence and competence. When a participant develops new skills and is given the chance to put these skills to the test, she gains the confidence in herself to accomplish tasks she never considered before. According to Carrie, this process of learning and taking action gives participants a “purpose or meaning in their lives.” For Carrie, she has chosen the wilderness as an avenue for creating purpose in her life, which she says has been an extremely rewarding experience. Carrie says this connectivity with nature is empowering because “spirituality in our society is missing.” When she finds this spirituality in nature, she feels an “inner stability,” which she sees in girls as well. “Women only programs enable girls and women to find and use their voices in ways they might

not feel comfortable doing in coed environments. They [female-only outdoor programs] allow you to think about who you are on the deepest level and talk about it with other women in this safe space.” According to Carrie, connection with nature facilitates an experience where a girl can connect with herself, and this is where the heart of empowerment through outdoor education exists.

Unique geography of the wilderness

Finally, all instructors touched upon the unique setting of the outdoors as a place where students can face challenges as an individual and within a group, teaching them relationship-building and communication skills. Maggie’s perspective of female-only outdoor education is unique because she has experience educating students inside the classroom and outside.

Therefore, her understanding of how the different geographies of urban versus nature are crucial for comprehending the effectiveness of outdoor education and classroom education on girls.

Outside, “they’re challenged in ways that teach them a lot about themselves. Challenges can include skill, mentality, etc. that they wouldn’t have in the urban setting just sitting in a chair.”

Therefore, girls gain more knowledge about themselves and who they are when they are outside and face concrete challenges. When students are inside, they learn about history, science, art, etc. and not enough about their own essences. In addition, according to Maggie, the outdoor setting is unique and beneficial because girls face challenges together, whereas inside they often face challenges individually. When the weather becomes bad or there is a safety issue on a rock climb, the group must come together to make a decision about how to overcome the present obstacle. This teaches girls interpersonal relationship building, which is a crucial skill as they grow into adulthood. Maggie notes that there may be group work in the classroom that forces kids to work together, but without the element of fear and the need for a timely decision, this

kind of group work is limiting and not as effective. In addition, when girls work with other girls, they are building a sisterhood. During a time where cattiness is so common, especially among middle school pre-teens and teenagers, girls can learn how to support each other rather than tear each other down.

Lasting transformation

According to all my interviews with instructors and directors of female-only outdoor programs, there is an overwhelming amount of evidence for the positive transformation of girls and women as a result of their experiences on their courses. Instructors have observed countless of girls coming into the week feeling shy and unsure of themselves and leaving the course ecstatic and completely comfortable in their own skin. Interestingly, the instructors explained that even the girls who seemingly had a “negative” experience still benefited from their courses because some kind of learning and empowerment still took place. These participants are most often the girls and women who would not identify themselves as outdoorswomen. Therefore, outsiders often see a “negative” response because these participants still do not enjoy being in the wilderness. However, according to the instructors, the goal of outdoor education is to provide participants with the tools they need to carry out the rest of their lives as independent, confident women, not to turn participants into outdoor enthusiasts (although instructors note that is always a plus). When instructors see a change in the participants’ self-worth and self-concept, then they know they have done their job.

Part of feeling comfortable in one’s own skin is having the self-esteem necessary to look into the mirror and smile. However, self-esteem includes more than improvement in physical body image. Instructors explain that a positive self-esteem is the connection between discovering one’s physical strengths as well as mental, emotional, and personal strengths. Outdoor education

can promote building this connection. Indeed, data collected from surveys at TWWI reflect this. In Figure 1 of Appendix A, for example, the graph shows differences in several physical and psychological traits pre- and post-course for TWWI participants ($n = 138$) in 2012. Girls were asked to fill out a survey before the course and rate themselves on a one to five scale (one being the worst and five being the best) in body capabilities (i.e. strength and endurance), technical skills (i.e. reading a map), body image, and overall confidence; anyone who entered a five is shown on the graph. As a result of their experiences in the outdoors, 46 percent of participants rated themselves with a five for body capabilities after their course (23 percent before the course). In addition, the number of participants to rate themselves with a five in technical skills jumped from 15 percent before the course to 38 percent after the course. In Figure 2 of Appendix B, the graph shows the results of the same surveys for women ($n = 112$). For body image, the amount of participants to answer with a five increased from 14 percent pre-course to 36 percent post-course. For overall confidence, the amount of participants to answer with a five dramatically increased from 10 percent pre-course to 72 percent post-course. This data is overwhelming evidence of the effectiveness of outdoor education in the positive transformation of women and girls. Evidently, participants leave their courses with a much better sense of self-esteem, confidence, and competence than when they entered, and this is one of the most important goals of the female-only outdoor education curriculum.

Individual Voices from Instructors

I have chosen to separately analyze interviews from Quinevil, Juno, and Amelia because their interview responses are important for critically understanding why experiential education is so important for girls and women. In addition, it is important to put a voice to my research, especially since this work focuses so much on the human experience of being in the outdoors.

Quinevil

“You know that you know, and you know that you will.” This is Quinevil’s definition of empowerment. After several years of leading an all-girls wilderness program called Goddess, Quinevil, which is her trail name, believes experiences in the outdoors can provide girls and women the ability to have confidence through competence. “Layers of learning take place.” These layers occur because the wilderness provides challenges that one may face several times (bad weather, technical terrain, difficult climbs, etc.), learning more about the challenge and oneself with each time. In addition, each time a girl conquers this challenge, she is able to conquer it with more ease as her competence and confidence increases. According to Quinevil, this act of accomplishment develops skills girls and women can use to overcome challenges in the urban setting. “If you face a situation in the urban world, you will know who you are, and that strength can come up from inside you because you already got through the bad rainstorm. You’re going to know how to handle it.”

Quinevil believes the outdoor setting can be beneficial for girls’ development because there is more simplicity out there than in the urban world. “All the things you would be worried about in the urban setting goes away. All you need to focus on is getting from point A to point B. You get the opportunity to just be present.” According to Quinevil, “being present” is difficult in the urban setting because there is so much outside stimulus and influences, especially from the media. We are rarely alone with ourselves, but when girls are in the wild, they have the opportunity to be present with themselves – an opportunity many women will never have the chance to experience.

Quinevil has seen her fair share of resistance from students. She has had participants who threw their packs on the ground and refused to walk another step, who cried leaving their

parents, and who never wanted to participate in the program in the first place. However, Quinevil describes how the trips can be “transformative,” especially for these resistant girls. “They have the choice to either make the best of it or push back against it. Most girls make the best of it.” Learning the skill of acceptance and letting go of anger is an important part of the wilderness experience, especially for girls and women who may first resist the idea of spending time in the outdoors, according to Quinevil. This skill can stay with the girls and women for the rest of their lives. “Acceptance is the key to happiness; if you learn that young, it makes life a whole lot easier of a ride. Whatever tragedy comes up, the discomfort comes from pushing against it. We get comfortable with any situation when we accept it, then we can move forward with a positive reaction.”

Through Quinevil’s experiences as an instructor, she hopes to see girls walk away from the program feeling “grounded.” “I want them to feel a little bit invincible.” According to Quinevil, this invincibility is an important source for girls to channel their strengths and bring the outside home. Girls especially may face confrontational situations as a result of lack of communication skills and peer pressure/bullying. According to Quinevil, however, girls can use their invincibility to push past these obstacles. Girls learn to remind themselves, “this person used to upset me, but now I don’t care because I’m not about what they think.”

Juno

“Equality doesn’t mean that men and women are the same; it means that their differences are necessary and valued.” Juno worked as the Program Director at TWWI and is an experienced National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) instructor. Therefore, she has experience instructing co-educational and female-only outdoor programs. “Our culture wants to name things male and female, but there are deeper ways of understanding dynamics. We get so hooked on the

physical form, but we have to work on the energetic level.” According to Juno, girls and women can grasp this energy from the Earth, especially in the wild, developing their individuality in relation to a much bigger picture. “We are not individuals; we are individuals in a context. The truth is you are in the whole system of the Earth and the Universe. That is context.” When girls contextualize themselves in relation to the Earth, they can grow as everything else on the Earth grows. In addition, the size of Earth’s and the Universe’s contexts can be scaled down to group dynamics, which is why group courses work so well for girls outdoor programs, according to Juno. “You start with a group of girls with the same issues. A group is a series of one-on-one relationships that are interwoven. That’s what TWWI did – create a context where one-on-one relationships were held as a whole. Wherever groups are, you can recreate that.” Juno notes that the ability to recreate these groups can help girls face other obstacles, such as bullies and peer pressure. “When a girl finds her center, it helps everything. It’ll make bullies go away because bullies don’t exist.” Juno notes “bullies don’t exist” because girls learn how to work in a group as individuals through their experiences in nature, which does not contain evil, and if “it’s not out there, then it [evil] isn’t real.”

Juno states how the energy of the Earth can be a great resource for girls and women to tap into for their own empowerment. “Empowerment is me accessing power that is available to me. We power from the energetic level of the Earth; there is no greater power. That is why we have to go outside.” Being in the wilderness, especially for extended periods of time, can encourage girls and women to access their own power via an outdoor setting. However, according to Juno, girls and women do not have to be in the wild 24/7 in order to harness this power. Even in the urban world, women and girls simply need to remember that the same Earth they connected with on their courses lies beneath them all the time, even if a few feet of concrete separates their

physical presences. Girls and women can always rely on the outside to come back to their centers if they feel temporarily lost. Here, “outside” can mean being miles away from another human being or going for a walk in the sunshine around her neighborhood.

Juno has never seen a girl leave an outdoor program with negative results. However, she has seen situations where people who do not understand the dynamics of all-female adventure programs might deem the girls’ experiences as negative. Juno explains one situation where a parent saw her daughter’s experience as negative, but Juno saw it as positive. This specific experience involved a girl with Asperger’s, who before the course had been shy and timid. After the course she was “light, happy, and had friends.” Her mom, however, worried about the content her daughter had been exposed to (her daughter all of a sudden knew how to “twerk”). Juno, however, reminded the mother that this girl needed exposure to other girls, and she developed friendships as a result of the bonding between the girls on the course. Juno also reminded the mother that her daughter was doing as humans do and “moving toward the light.” This light helps us do good for ourselves, which Juno believes is an extremely important concept for girls to grasp. “You do not see a tree growing next to another tree and give away its resources. When you inspire people to take action, they take action from their beliefs and core system, and you have to term your language to inspire that.” This language is a skill instructors develop to help the girls find their “why.” “If they [the girls] can find their why, then the ‘how’ and the ‘what’ can be used. Girls [outdoor] programs help them find their ‘why.’” Once girls find their purpose and passion, they can move forward to accomplish concrete goals, but digging deeper into learning about themselves must come first before anything else can be accomplished. Juno explained this concept of helping girls find their “why” to the girl’s mother who thought her

daughter's experience was bad. The daughter had discovered her "why," and she was in the midst of a beautiful process that involves a great deal of change and exposure.

The transformation of girls and women comes from learning about the "why." According to Juno, this can fuel a girl's empowerment and clarify that we always have choices. "We get this illusion that we have this definition of life that's not big enough in context. If you look at us as light beings, it's a different game. No matter how horrible their [the girls' and women's] circumstances, those circumstances do not determine their future. Realizing that is empowerment."

Since Juno is a highly experienced NOLS instructor, she has worked with co-educational outdoor programs as well as all-female programs. According to Juno, boys and girls experience the wilderness differently because "boys need the hierarchal structure." They need to be given discipline and have a set of rules to abide by. Girls, however, need to break away from hierarchy in order to find themselves. Juno notes that female participants and instructors of NOLS need to break away from the patriarchal system in order to understand such a structure. They need to be in "the other way of knowing."

Juno first discovered her love for the outdoors in her early childhood. Her father was a sailor, and they were always outside either sailing, hiking, playing, or camping. One of the hardest things to understand about girls and women's outdoor education is how it helps them in the urban world when the backpacks have been unpacked and the showers have been taken. Juno explains that girls outdoor programs teach them ways to access the Earth without being in the wild. Instructors help the participants build a "relationship with the Earth, which is beyond human. Our bones and our flesh are made out of Her. If they [the participants] are taught that, they will access it [the wilderness]." This is the difference between girls outdoor programs and

girls urban programs. Participants are taught about the internal presence of the Earth instead of external factors, which is a very powerful concept. The Earth is a beautiful place, so if we are made from her, are we not just as beautiful?

Amelia

Amelia has an extensive history of working in the outdoors, and she has a Masters Degree in Wilderness Therapy from Naropa University in Boulder, CO. Amelia has worked for TWWI for several years, leading multiple trips, especially those involving rock climbing since she has experience rock climbing for almost two decades.

In addition to working with all-girls and women programs, Amelia has instructed coeducational programs as well, so she has seen the differences between these two types of curriculums. One of the most important benefits of outdoor education in general is its ability to foster an environment of leaders. When kids and adults participate in these programs, they either develop leadership skills they never had before or refine old ones. Either way, Amelia believes all-female outdoor programs can help girls and women develop their leadership skills more effectively than coeducational programs. Amelia notes that this does not mean women cannot be leaders at all when there are men present, but interestingly they tend to take on the more “feminine” leadership roles, such as negotiating conflict, while men take on the more “masculine” roles, such as navigation and decision-making. In addition, girls and women are more likely to have “self-leadership” than boys and men, according to Amelia. “Self-leadership” refers to the personal aspects of leadership, such as making sure you have done all the tasks you have been instructed to do, keeping your pack together, and staying on top of your own needs. While this is a great part of leadership, Amelia believes female-only outdoor programs allow girls and women to explore “all aspects of leadership and skill building. Girls then see other girls

doing these things, and there's something incredibly powerful about that. They can picture themselves there." Observing other girls and women working with leadership in all contexts automatically defies the myth that females cannot make as effective leaders as men. A domino effect then takes place. As girls and women watch other girls and women become leaders, they embrace those skills themselves and become observations for other girls and women and so on. This cycle of influence is important for the future of women's roles in society.

Amelia stresses the importance of not excluding gender from wilderness experiences. "When I am a woman going out on my own to camp alone or do a solo backpacking trip or lead a climb, I am a woman doing these things. It's been an inherently empowering experience." Female-only outdoor courses are critical because they emphasize gender as part of the experience. On the other hand, coeducational programs do not take any notice to gender. According to Amelia, even if coeducational programs did include an emphasis on gender, it would not be as effective as single gender programs because there would inevitably be a superior-inferior divide in the group with women most likely taking the inferior role. However, outdoor schools like TWWI promote women reflecting on themselves *as* women in the woods, and this can be incredibly empowering.

"Empowerment is about owning your own power. It's not power over someone else; it's truly owning your own ability to make choices, your own ability to set boundaries, and your own ability to make judgment calls." As an experienced outdoorswoman, Amelia has found herself in many situations where she needed to trust herself and her own ability to make decisions. For example, she may be leading a climb where she finds herself in a situation where there is no good gear placement and there may not be for a decent amount of feet. It is at this point that she must make a decision to come down from the rock or keep climbing. In the end, however, it is

her decision because there is no one else up there to tell her otherwise. According to Amelia, the outdoors has given her the ability to rely on herself to make good judgment calls that are beneficial for *her*. “I trust myself to be able to access my inner resources to deal with the challenges that life presents me.” This is crucial for empowerment, according to Amelia. She is empowered because she trusts her experiences and knowledge enough to embrace any obstacle life may throw at her. Furthermore, she makes decisions for herself, and she does not feel the need to apologize for them. If she feels like she should quit a climb early or keep going, then she does not have to feel any sort of guilt or shame. In a society where girls and women’s decision-making power is taken away from them, this kind of owning is incredibly empowering. Women and girls are not only claiming themselves *for* themselves, but they are learning how to choose what is best for them.

As an experienced wilderness therapist and instructor, Amelia has seen participants leave their courses with more of a negative opinion of their experiences than a positive one. However, Amelia notes that there will always be participants who do not enjoy being outdoors, and this does not mean that the outdoors does not have any positive effect on them. “They come out with a new sense of friendship, strength, abilities, and so much learning. In my experience, they know it. They’ll say, ‘I never want to go outside again, but I wouldn’t trade this for the world.’” According to Amelia, the lessons participants learn in their programs are so valuable that even though they may not enjoy sleeping in a tent and backpacking all day, those experiences helped them develop self-esteem and confidence regardless.

According to Amelia, there are two main reasons for the lasting impact of outdoor programs for women and girls. First, the emotional impact is very high. When girls and women are in a setting like the wild together, emotions can quickly come to the surface. This is because

it is easier to keep one's feelings in the urban setting when there are so many distractions that we cannot self-reflect. In the outdoors, however, these distractions disappear. Therefore, a space for self-reflection and bonding is present, and participants fully envelop themselves in this space. "Emotional experiences are what endure in our memories." Since these emotional experiences become engrained in participants' minds, they can draw from them throughout the rest of their lives. In this way, female-only outdoor programs create a long-term effect rather than a short-term Band-Aid solution. Participants can revert to their memory banks at any point they feel lost or out of control of their emotions. According to Amelia, this can then bring us back to a more stable state where we are in control of our lives. Second, outdoor programs are unlike participants' normal routines. "They [participants] are popped out of the normal fabric of life. They are not amongst normal systems, so they have an opportunity to explore who they are outside of that context. That's integral to the wilderness." Taking girls and women out of their day-to-day worlds gives them a chance to discover themselves in a space where they do not need to fit a specific mold. It is here that they can truly develop as humans, and this development is crucial for the lasting impact of outdoor education. Whether it is five months, years, or decades later, women and girls can draw upon their experiences in the wild with other women and girls to progress to each stage of their lives in a positive and healthy manner.

Amelia is passionate about educating girls and women in the outdoors, and she believes there are many advancements that can be made in order to see a brighter future for girls and women's experiential education. First, there needs to be more funding of these programs. Without the funding, outdoor schools like TWWI cannot run their courses. In addition, they cannot offer scholarships and financial aid to participants of lower income, excluding a huge group of people from the benefits of outdoor education. Second, Amelia wants to see more

research about the effectiveness of female-only outdoor education, specifically concerning the aspect of female instructors because she believes a major reason these programs are so effective is the fact that girls and women can learn from other powerful women. Third, Amelia hopes to see more “authentic challenges,” which she describes as “not watered down.” Authentic challenges force participants to reflect on themselves and face their fears, no matter how scary it all might seem. An important example of an authentic challenge is the wilderness solo. The solo experience is a key part of the outdoor education program because it teaches girls and women how to be by themselves and includes the aspect of fear, which can be an extremely powerful liberation tool. For Amelia, being out in the wilderness allows her to “feel my own ability” because she must cook, clean, make a fire, and survive completely alone. “I’m the one who was able to hang in with myself even though I was scared all night.” According to Amelia, this is where the authentic challenge lies. Facing one’s fear by oneself is critical for the development of a healthy self-esteem, and the solo experience has proven to be very successful in female-only outdoor education.

According to Amelia, fear should not be considered a negative emotion. In fact, outdoor programs embrace fear and use it as a means to power, especially since fear is actually a normal part of life, says Amelia. “It’s [fear] a given. We’re always going to get scared. It [female-only outdoor education] is teaching young girls ways to work with fear that allows them to have more choice.” As an instructor, Amelia wants her students to realize choice is more accessible than it may seem, especially in scary situations. However, she also realizes that young girls and women often do not have the privilege to the same choices as men or are forced to make the wrong ones for themselves. “I think girls are taught a certain set of ways to deal with fear culturally generally around being small, doing less, taking on less, asking someone (a man) for help.” According to

Amelia, outdoor education combats this and provides girls the tools to make more choices available to them instead of “just staying inside because you’ll be neat and pretty there.”

Participant Themes

My data only consisted of five participant interviews due to the lack of responses I received, but these interviews still shared themes that also reflect on the instructors’ observations, especially since several of the instructors were actually participants at one point or another in their lives. However, one theme – safe space – appeared more in my interviews with participants than instructors. In this section, I discuss three themes: safe space, empowerment, and the unique geography of the wilderness, and why these themes are important for participants’ positive transformation due to their experiences in the wild with other girls and women.

Safe space

The most prevalent theme was the creation of a safe space. For these participants, their experiences of sharing deep secrets, especially traumatic ones, was liberating. This process of sharing and listening was freeing in the sense that the girls could finally open themselves up to a group of people and receive such a comforting response. Through this liberation, participants gained the confidence they needed to face other obstacles. Lucy, for example, finally felt secure enough to tell her mom about her rape, which in turn liberated her even more because her and her family moved out of the house as a result. CEO (trail name) talks about the community support of Goddess. She reflects on a time when one of her instructors and fellow participants jumped off a 25-foot cliff into the water. Of course, the instructor had made sure it was safe, but she had still been scared to do it. After jumping, however, CEO remembers the rush of adrenaline clearly. “I had never felt so alive! It was in that moment that I realized how much of a

strong, powerful Goddess I truly am, and it was because I was surrounded by other powerful Goddesses who pushed me to challenge myself.”

Empowerment

The second most important theme that popped out in my interviews with participants was the feeling of empowerment and self-worth. Becky, who had participated in Goddess for seven years, struggled with anorexia for several years before her first Goddess trip. “I had never felt like I was good enough. I would look at all these women on TV and think, ‘if I can’t look like them, then I’ll never be loved.’ Goddess taught me that loving myself was more important than anything else.” The participants in my research felt that learning how to love themselves and accept themselves for who they really are played a huge part in their empowerment processes. CEO says, “I have confidence in myself and am empowered because it doesn’t matter what other people think of me. I know what I’ve been through and what I’ve accomplished, and that’s all I need to keep moving forward.”

Unique geography of the wilderness

The last theme of the participant interviews was the effectiveness of the wilderness as a geographical setting in which true learning can take place. Lucy explains, “Being outside is scary, and even after participating in Goddess several times, I wouldn’t call myself an outdoorswoman. With that being said, Goddess would not have had the same impact on me if it were inside. I would have been too comfortable.” Participants talk about comfort zones and how the wilderness allowed them to explore areas outside their comfort zones. When Becky first rock climbed, she explains that it was both a “terrible and wonderful” experience. “I’m afraid of heights, so when I got to the top, I remember feeling awesome and strong. Then I looked down, and I couldn’t let go of the rock. When I eventually did build up the courage to come down, I

think I was more proud of myself for that than actually climbing.” Climbing to the top was not a problem for Becky, which most would consider to be a huge fear factor. Coming down from the rock pushed her to the edge of her comfort zone, but she would not trade that experience for anything in the world. “It taught me more about myself and my boundaries than sitting in any classroom would have.” In addition, the group comes together more in the outdoors than in the urban setting. CEO says, “I remember this one time when we were hiking on a pretty dangerous ridge in the White Mountains, and everyone was noticeably worried about falling. So we all decided to play a talking game to keep our minds off the danger. We had each other’s backs.” When girls are in the urban setting, there is no pressing need for group support. However, in order to maintain safety in the outdoors, community support is necessary for mental and physical well-being. Therefore, girls learn how to communicate better about their wants and needs and how to make decisions that is best for the wants and needs of the group as a whole.

Individual Voices of the Participants

I have chosen to analyze two (CEO and Lucy) out of five of my participant interviews separately for the same reasons as the instructors. These interviews are critical for engaging with the research and understanding the evidence on a human level since readers can read about participants’ experiences first hand.

CEO

CEO is a suitable trail name for this young woman. When she was eleven years old, she began participating in the Goddess program, which she explains was “based on empowering young women through outdoor experiences that boost their self-confidence.” CEO acquired her name because she was not afraid to let her leadership skills shine. She was always facilitating group discussions, making decisions for herself, and looking out for the safety of the group. CEO

believes she is a natural born leader, but she also notes that Goddess helped her refine her leadership skills. “I learned how to advocate for myself and the group. I wanted to make sure everyone’s voices were being heard.” In listening to everyone’s voices, CEO quickly learned that even though she did not have much in common with the other girls, they all shared a unique bond because they had been in the woods for an extended period of time together. “It was such a separate space – an alternate universe – that became safe.” CEO feels that this safe space is the reason saying goodbye at the end of the course was always so hard. “I had found a community I could really trust.” In this community, she could share her deepest secrets and reveal her true self, which she had always felt the need to do but was too afraid. “Sometimes, I just don’t feel comfortable letting people know who I really am, but Goddess was different. I do not know where I would be now if it wasn’t for that program.”

Goddess has transcended into CEO’s everyday life because she has learned how to be a leader. “Now I know I can handle things by myself. I don’t need someone handing me the solution to a problem on a silver platter.” One of the ways her instructors helped facilitate CEO’s leadership development was giving her the map and trusting her to navigate the group to the next campsite. “I was so nervous we would get lost, and at first we did, but then I realized part of being a leader is not being afraid to ask for help, so I asked the group for their opinions when we came to a cross-trail. After collaborating, we found the right way, and I was beaming with pride.” Another way Goddess helped CEO grow into a leader was the presence of “two such powerful, strong, independent women,” who were her instructors. She still keeps in contact with them to this day. “Who wants to spend a week in the woods with a bunch of 14-year-old girls? They knew it was important, which showed us that we were worth being someone’s priority.” By observing this, CEO began to grow a sense of self-value and self-worth. If she could mean so

much to her instructors, then she must mean more to herself. “Goddess gave me my own voice. Now I know I’m worthy of the time and space I take up.”

Lucy

Lucy never wanted to go to Goddess in the first place. Her school counselor had told her mom about the program, and her mom had forced her to participate. Lucy hated anything that had to do with being outside. She could not stand the thought of being without make-up, her cell phone, and a shower everyday. Yet, her mother was desperate. Lucy had begun to experiment with drugs at the age of 13, and she would skip school more often than she would attend. Her mother did not know why her daughter was heading down such a dark path, and she thought Goddess might help her make new friends that would influence her to make the right choices. “I was so mad at her starting a few weeks before my first trip. Now, I thank her everyday for sticking to her guts and making me go. It changed my life.”

Lucy recalls her first day of backpacking. She remembers how badly her feet hurt and the way her instructors would not let her turn around and sleep in the van for a week until the rest of them came back. She cried that first night because she was so scared. She had never slept in the woods before, and they did not even have a tent. They had made a lean-to out of a tarp, and she was sure a snake or other animal would crawl into her sleeping bag during the night. She missed her friends and wanted to go home, but she was sure at this point the only way out was forward.

By the third day, Lucy had made some friends, and her feet had gotten used to all the hiking. She started feeling proud of herself. “We peaked our first mountain on day two, and I remember thinking how I had never seen something so beautiful in my life. And then I remember thinking how I *walked* all the way up there with a heavy pack. You just can’t help but smile at that!” As the week continued to roll on, Lucy’s instructors sent the participants on their first

wilderness solo. This solo was a few hours long, and the participants were told to write a letter to themselves that they would then receive in a year. Lucy remembers how at first she was at a loss for words, but then the tears came and the words followed suit. “I just cried. I couldn’t stop. Being alone in the middle of the woods is terrifying because there is nothing else to distract you from your issues. It was like they [my issues] had all of a sudden hit me in the face.” Lucy explains that writing the letter to herself was one of the most difficult things she has ever had to do, but she says it was worth it when she opened the letter a year later. “It came at a perfect time. I was having a hard time, and when I got that letter, I was reminded all of a sudden of how strong I am. If I could handle the solo, I can handle this.”

When the group came together around the campfire for their last night, Lucy felt sad because she did not want to leave the incredible group of girls she had created a bond with. “I could tell we were always going to be best friends for life, even if we didn’t talk for a while. You can’t go through an experience like Goddess and lose that connection with your fellow Goddesses. You just can’t.” Lucy describes that last night as magical because everyone shared her journal entries from the week. Through this sharing, a safe space of listening was created. “Everyone was really quiet and intent on listening to whoever was speaking. Then, we started sharing things that not even our parents knew. That’s when I finally gained the courage to share my story.” Lucy started experimenting with drugs and alcohol at such a young age and skipping school because she did not know how to handle her rape. When she was ten years old, her stepfather began to molest her, finally raping her about a year before her first Goddess trip. “I had never told anybody that. I thought people would call me a slut, and my mom liked the guy so much that I couldn’t ruin him for her, but when I told everyone on Goddess my story, they all just hugged me, and we cried. We didn’t just cry for me though; we cried for all of us.”

Lucy told her mom everything. Her mom could not believe the man she thought she loved could harm her daughter so brutally. Lucy, her mom, and her two young brothers left the house and moved in with her grandmother. Even though it was cramped, Lucy explains the relief she felt living there. “Knowing that he couldn’t hurt me anymore – that I made it so he couldn’t hurt me by speaking up – was so empowering. Goddess taught me that I do not deserve what he did to me. No girl does. I love myself because of Goddess.” Lucy is now studying at Southern Connecticut State University to become a social worker so that she may help other girls who have experienced similar trauma. With a smile she says, “I’m the first in my family to go to college. Hell, I’m the first woman in my family to not get pregnant and drop out of high school. I know that if it wasn’t for Goddess, I would not be where I am today.”

Conclusion

“It’s always great for me to have time to myself without my children and husband, to pursue things that are important to me, meet other women that are looking for the same kinds of experiences and to be in nature with people that I trust guiding me” (TWWI participant, age 40). Female-only outdoor programs have empowered women and girls to take control of their lives for themselves in order to overcome obstacles of patriarchy. Through the development of hard (physical) and soft (emotional) skills, adventure education provides women and girls with the tools they need to move forward and become agents of their own lives, making decisions by themselves and for themselves.

The process of finally claiming one’s body and life is not black and white, and it is certainly not simple. Participants must face scary obstacles and completely step out of their comfort zones. While there are a handful of participants who have a “negative” experience on their courses, there is often still an element of positive transformation, even if this change is not completely visible. In addition, there is an overwhelming amount of evidence from my literature review, interviews, and surveys that support the majority of participants leave their courses with a new love for the wilderness and, most importantly, a new love for themselves.

The empowerment and positive transformation of women and girls through female-only outdoor education lends itself to geographical research because understanding the relationship between nature and people is crucial for comprehending the deep and life-changing impacts of the wilderness on participants. Furthermore, looking at this topic through a geographical lens is more effective than looking at this topic through any other lens because my findings show that the geographical *setting* of the wild is one of the most important factors of outdoor education curriculum. The outdoors can be scary, exhilarating, and completely different from what we are

used to as civilized human beings. Therefore, girls and women can step outside of their comfort zones and explore a place where social norms have no meaning. Here, true learning about themselves and their relationships with people and the Earth takes place.

According to the Outdoor Foundation, girls' participation in the outdoors is currently at its lowest since 2006 ("Girls' Wilderness Adventures and Women's Courses | Women's Wilderness,"). Since girls and women continue to face the adverse effects of sexism on their physical and psychological well-beings, there needs to be a way to help women and girls become stronger and empowered in order to combat patriarchy. Evidence from my literature review but overwhelmingly more from my interviews supports outdoor education as an avenue for girls and women to achieve their goals and gain a sense of self-worth. However, there are not many outdoor programs available for girls and women only. Further research needs to discover why this is and support the establishment of more organizations like The Women's Wilderness Institute. I am not the only one who wishes to see more research focus on girls and women's outdoor education. All of my interview subjects expressed some sort of desire to see more research conducted on the topic, as more analysis can encourage the establishment and funding of female outdoor schools. After all, our mothers, daughters, and sisters deserve everything female-only outdoor programs have to offer them.

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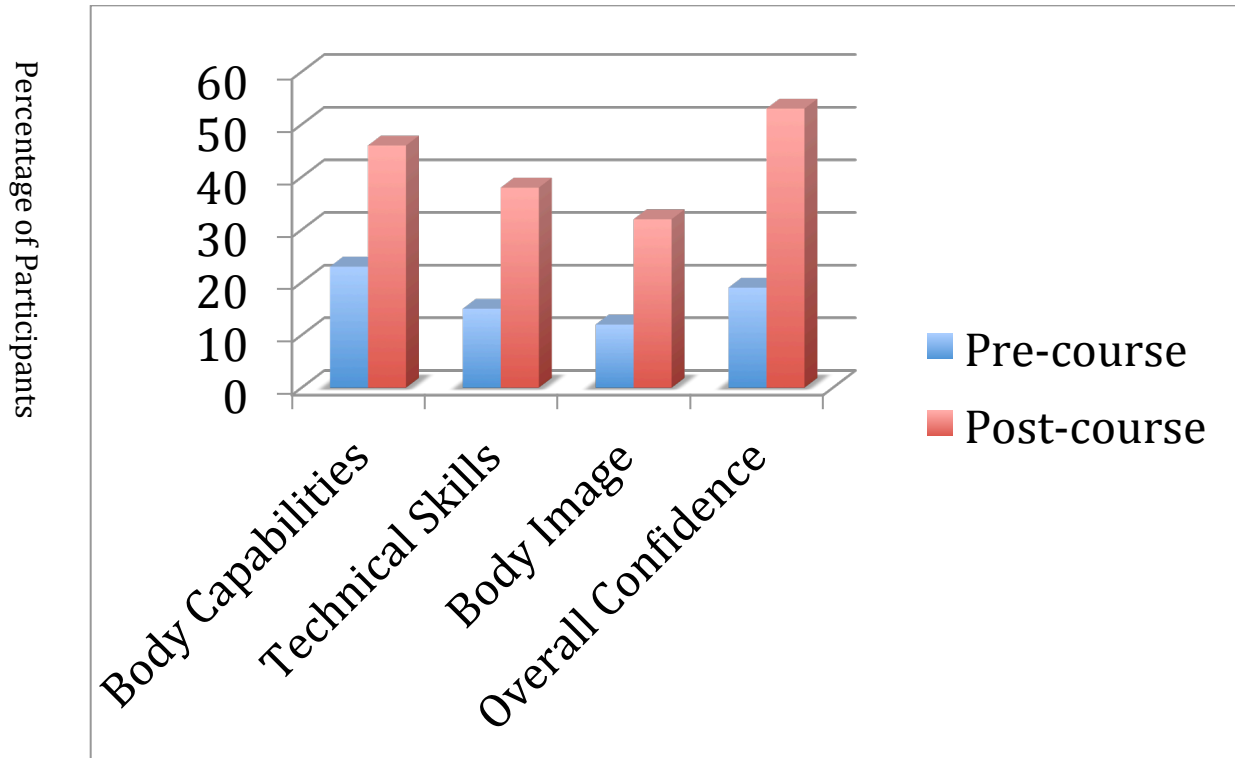
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Appendix A

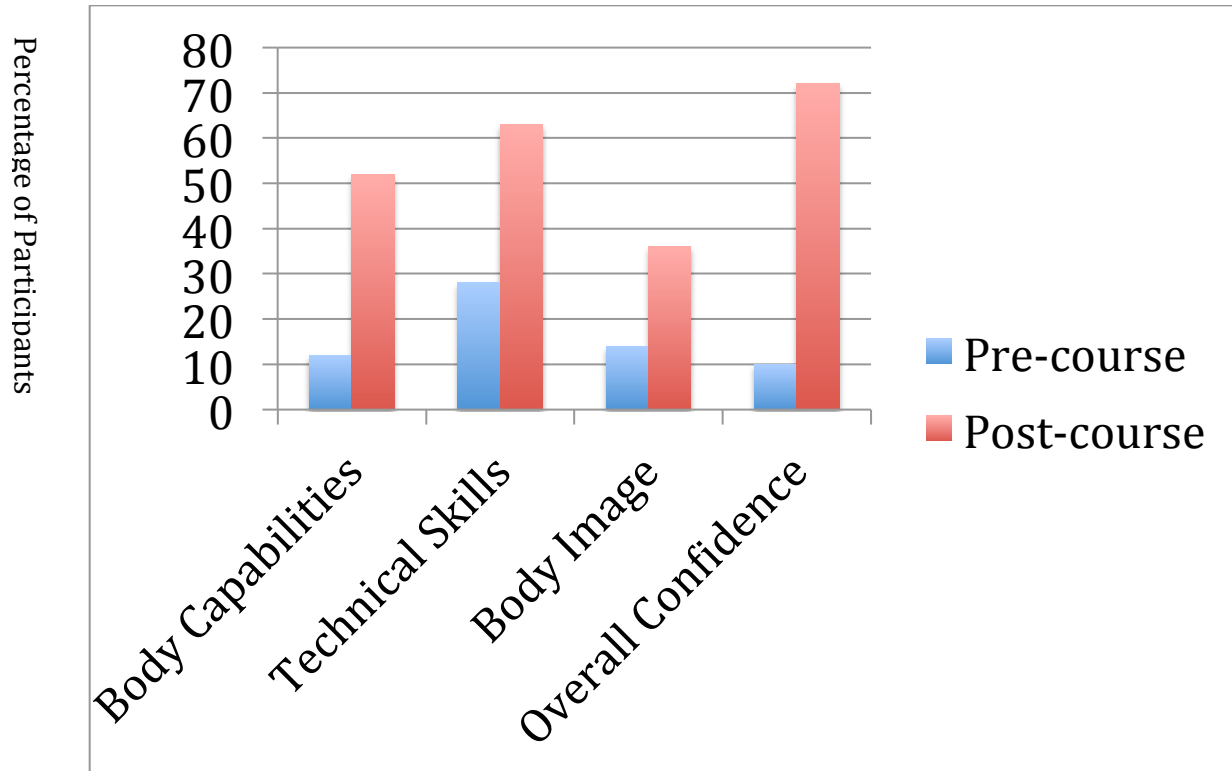
Figure 1. Self-Esteem Improvements for Women's Wilderness Girls Participants in 2012



Surveys are given to each participant before and after their courses at The Women's Wilderness Institute in Boulder, CO. Each participant is asked to rate themselves in each of these categories based on a one to five scale (one being the worst and five being the best). The data shows significant improvements in the number of girls who rate themselves with a five, especially in the category of overall confidence (n=138).

Appendix B

Figure 2. Self-Esteem Improvements for Women's Wilderness Women Participants in 2012



Surveys are given to each participant before and after their courses at The Women's Wilderness Institute in Boulder, CO. Each participant is asked to rate themselves in each of these categories based on a one to five scale (one being the worst and five being the best). The data shows significant improvements in the number of women who rate themselves with a five, especially in the category of overall confidence. The significance of overall confidence overlaps between women and girls (n=112).